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A History of the Pleas & Hill Families

by Maurice Hill

Silas Husted Pleas was the son of Obediah Jackson Pleas and Isabella Husted Pleas. He was born Nov. 16, 1815 in New York.

On May 20, 1842 he married Ann Shear. They had two children who both passed away in 1848.

Silas Pleas was an early immigrant to California, arriving in 1852. He first came to San Joaquin County in 1858.

Mr. Pleas was a school teacher for a while and was also a rural preacher, preaching at the old Harmony Grove Church on occasion.

Silas Pleas owned 260 acres of land northwest of the Mokelumne River. His ranch began on the northwest side of what is now the Mokelumne bridge located on the 99 highway. The land extended north to Woodbridge Road and then west to the railroad track.

At some time, not known, Mr. Pleas lost his first wife.

In 1865, Silas heard of a young widow with three small children living near Ann Arbor, Michigan.

It so happened that this woman was Mrs. Philander Lewis whose husband enlisted in the Army during the Civil War. He was captured by the Confederate forces and passed away in prison at Andersonville, Georgia, 1864.

Silas journeyed to Michigan in order to meet and get acquainted with Mrs. Lewis. Romance bloomed and Mary Jane Johnson Lewis became Mrs. Silas Pleas.

The family made the trip to California by way of Panama. The three children were Zaidee, Mary and George Lewis. Mary Lewis was a child of eight years at this time and she remembered the trip and especially crossing the Isthmus of Panama.

The Pleas family took up residence in a roomy farmhouse on the ranch.

Mr. Pleas was engaged in the earlier years on the farm in raising wheat, but in time he began to raise watermelons, a product which made Lodi famous as a watermelon center.

Mr. Pleas was well known as a hospitable host. In the early days, travelers

At left George W. Hill surrounded by his family, Nellie (left), Mary and Maurice. Above early pioneers Silas and Mary Jane Pleas.

The G.W. Hill residence in its original location, 115 S. School Street. This photo was taken sometime between 1903 to 1905.

were hard-put to find suitable accommodations, but those who came to the door of the Pleas home always found a welcome with food and shelter.

Mrs. Pleas was a busy woman in those early days. She had the task of feeding not only her family, but the hired help which came to work for Mr. Pleas. Another chore was in making homemade soap for their own use.

The hard life as a wife of a pioneer farmer took its toll and Mrs. Pleas passed away from tuberculosis before her 47th birthday, Aug. 12, 1883. Unfortunately, Mr. Pleas' stepson, George Lewis, as a result of the grueling farm duties, also contracted tuberculosis and passed away on March 30, 1888 at the age of 26. His half-brother, Silas Freeman Pleas, passed away for the same reason on Feb. 15, 1890 before his twenty-third birthday.

Mr. and Mrs. Silas Pleas were also the parents of three daughters: Daisy Marilla Pleas was born Feb. 19, 1872; Linda Rosa Jane Pleas was born Sept. 19, 1875; Liby May (Lillian) Pleas was born March 15, 1878.

Meanwhile the two stepdaughters, Zaidee Lewis and Mary Eliza Lewis were growing into young womanhood. Zaidee had been born Feb. 14, 1856, while Mary was born July 1, 1857.

On March 14, 1875, Mary Lewis married George W. Hill, a Lodi jeweler who came to Mokelumne in 1869, the year it was laid out as a town. Mary Lewis was 17 years old when she became Mrs. George Hill.

Zaidee Lewis married Luther Runyon of Tulare County on Sept. 5, 1875. She spent her entire married life on a ranch a few miles from Visalia. Mr. and Mrs. Runyon were the parents of seven children.

The first home of Mr. and Mrs. George Hill was a two-story house set back from the street on the southeast corner of Pine and School streets. At present this is the location of Thornton House Furniture. Part of the building was used as a jewelry store with the remaining portion living quarters.

Between 1877 and 1879, Mr. Hill built a one-story brick building on north Sacramento Street just north of the northwest corner of Pine and Sacramento streets. This building was divided into two sections, the north half and the rear part of the southside being converted into a dwelling, while the jewelry store occupied the front south section. It was here that Nellie Etta Hill was born nearly 10 years after her parents' marriage.

In the mid-1880's, the family bought a home on south School Street. Here they resided until 1902 at which time the family moved into their new home at the same location. The Cary brothers erected this fine house. Mr. Hill was the architect for this home and even went to great pains to build a good-sized model of this house, complete in every detail. For a number of years this museum piece remained in the storeroom of the new two-story brick business building, constructed in 1888 after the destructive fire of 1887. After keeping the house model until he tired of looking at it, Mr. Hill broke it up for kindling wood.

After Mrs. Silas Pleas passed away in 1883 and Mr. Pleas in 1885, Mr. William John Rixon became guardian of the three Pleas daughters.

Mrs. George Hill took her half-sister, Daisy Marilla Pleas, to live with her. Mr. Rixon and his wife cared for Linda and Mr. and Mrs. Keagle took Lillian for awhile. Later, Mr. Rixon took charge of Lillian.

Linda Pleas married William Reid Wells Nov. 6, 1895 in Tulare County. They had a son and three daughters.

Linda Wells and her husband lived on a farm northeast of Visalia for many years.

Lillian Pleas married Arthur Cunningham in 1901 in Sacramento. Mr. Cunningham was, at this time, the star of the Tivoli Opera House in San Francisco and Lillian was also a member of the opera company. They appeared in numerous productions at the Tivoli up to the time of the 1906 earthquake.

Daisy Marilla Pleas, 1890

After the fire, Mr. Cunningham spent the remainder of his life in the theatre playing all over the United States.

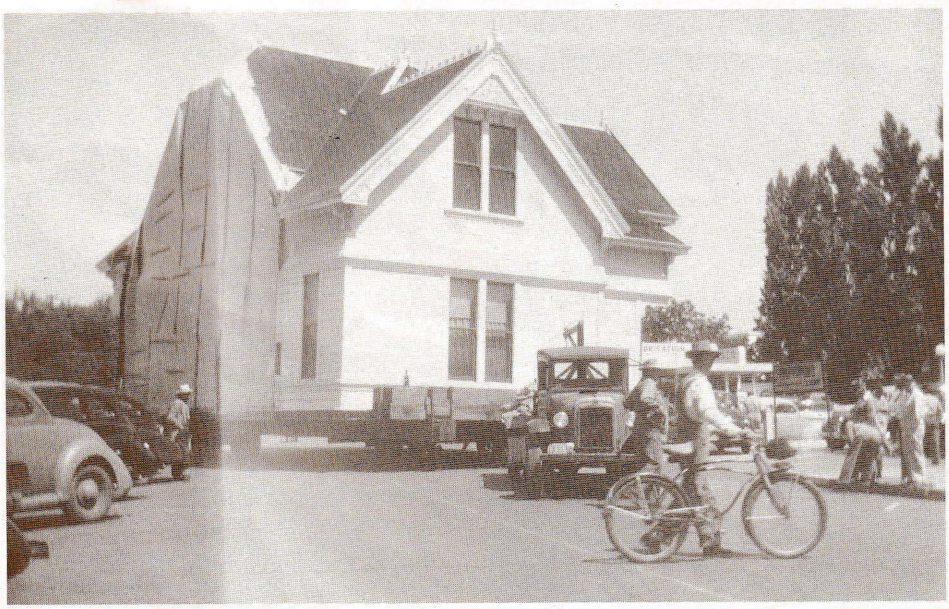
Arthur Cunningham passed away June 3, 1944. His wife remained a widow for three years, then married Mr. Clarence Rees in 1947. He was an old friend and former theatrical man.

Mrs. Rees passed away in the fall of 1964 and Mr. Rees followed her during the winter of 1969.

Daisy Marilla Pleas never married. While attending the Lodi high school she began to spend part time in her brother-in-law's jewelry store, learning the watch making business. When she completed her schooling in 1890, she began to give her time fully to the jewelry store business.

During the ensuing years salesmen who came to the store were amazed to find a female watchmaker in the business. As far as is known she was California's first female watchmaker. Her business career in Lodi probably established a record, for it extended from 1890 to 1950, a period of 60 years.

In 1950, she retired from the jewelry store. Daisy Marilla Pleas was very active in the Lodi Methodist Church, both in the choir and as a Sunday school teacher. She also served as head of the local Native Daughters of the Golden West lodge. Daisy Pleas passed away in Lodi on Nov. 20, 1960.



In 1948 the Hill house was moved to its present location on south Church St.

George W. Hill was born in Brownfield, Maine. His date of birth is not known, but was probably about 1840.

When the railroad came to Mokelumne in 1869 he was one of the first passengers. At that time there were no regular passenger cars and he, along with other men, had to make their headquarters in the baggage cars. No doubt the men came with lunches to supplement food obtained at towns where the train stopped.

George Hill arrived in Mokelumne in the fall of 1869. His brother I.J. Hill was either here first or arrived soon after. Another brother, William, the oldest of seven, also came to Mokelumne, but went on to the Oregon country and was not heard from again.

George and his brother batched together at first. By 1870, Mr. Hill had set up a jewelry store and watch repair shop. He had learned his trade at the Waltham factory and had become a skilled watchmaker.

George Hill was upon the local scene when Lodi, known then as Mokelumne or Mokelumne Station, was born as a town. Through the years he saw Lodi grow from a village of a few scattered buildings to a small city.

Mr. Hill was active in the Lodi Methodist Church. It is said he was the first Sunday school superintendent. He was also a Mason, Knight Templar and Shriner.

George Hill was also an accomplished cabinetmaker though he never practiced this hobby commercially. In the Hill home is a large bookcase which is quite ornamental and entirely the work of his hands. In the hall, is

Ladies of the Lodi Methodist Choir, 1910. Left to right, top row, Daisy Pleas, Mrs. Olcott, Mrs. Ernest Winning, Mrs. May Willms, Vera McCleary. Lower row, Mrs. Scoggins, Mrs. Flora Randolph, Mrs. G.W. Hill, Grace Smith, Martha Rinn. Jessie McCall, choir direction, in front.

Mrs. G.W. Hill, 1907

a large wall clock the case of which George made.

Mr. Hill also delved in the writing of verse, usually of a humorous nature. And, in the early days of Lodi, he was an excellent debater at the meetings of the Cucumis Club.

In the 1890's Mr. Hill also made picture frames to sell.

George W. Hill had a remarkable reputation for honesty. He never became a wealthy man, but was content to earn a modest living. Salesmen, and finding that he only made a 50% profit on his goods, chided him, telling him that jewelers in general made 100% on their sales. But Mr. Hill never varied from his practice.

He was not what one would call a social man, but was very involved in his business. His hours were exacting. He expected to be at work each morning at 7:00. Punctually, at noon, the store was closed while he and Daisy went home for lunch. But he was back at the store within a half hour. And he closed promptly at 6:00 p.m.

His regularity carried over into his home life. Meals were always at a stated hour. And, in the evening when it was 9:00, he arose from his chair and prepared for bed. He got up at 6:00 a.m. and expected everyone else in the household to rise when he did.

An observant neighbor once stated that the only time during the week that George used the front door was on Sunday, going to and from church.

George Washington Hill was in business in Lodi from 1870 to 1927, a period of 57 years. He passed away on Feb. 22, 1927 — Washington's birthday.

Mary E. Hill was said to have been the handsomest girl in Lodi when she was young. She evidently took after her mother, who had been called San Joaquin County's best looking woman.

At the time she was married at the age of 17, Mary knew very little about cooking and it has been told that her husband taught her how to cook. Mary was not like George, who was always reserved and businesslike. She was an extremely vivacious person, socially inclined and with a great affection for people. In return her friends

The "Lumbering" Days

[Reprinted from "History of San Joaquin County", page 215, The Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago, 1890.]

A sawmill was built the year of 1852, near Benedict's Ferry, on the north bank of the Mokelumne River, by Bramlett & Langford. It was removed to Hoge & Terry's ranch in 1854, to their proprietorship.

[Reprinted from "History of San Joaquin County, California", page 116, Thompson & West, Oakland, CA, 1879.]

In 1877, the Lodi Land and Lumber Co. built on the Mokelumne River, about a mile from Lodi, the finest sawmill on the coast. It was erected at a cost of $40,000, and having a sawing capacity of 40,000 feet per day. This company depends upon the mountains for their logs, cutting them in the summer, floating them down the river during the high water in the winter or spring.

[Reprinted from "Our County — San Joaquin" by Annie McKenzie, page 96, copyright 1935.]

Next time you cross Cherokee Lane bridge look up the river and see if you can picture the time when logs floated down the river from the mountains to Lawrence Sawmill on the banks of the river east of the bridge. This mill was one of the finest in the state.

[From the Lodi News Sentinel]

The sawmill east of Lodi, known as Bramlett & Langford, when passing by the mill pond, the future prominent local men and ladies of decorum always faced west, because bathing suits were not sold by local stores.

Spring floods harassed the settlers each year and gradually successful attempts at building levees were carried to completion. But the levees were weak in proportion to the fury of the torrents. Magnifying the power of the floodwaters were huge logs, felled upstream, which were being floated to a sawmill near Lodi. The logs ploughed through the levees. The Lodi lumbermen laughed and laughed, while flood stricken ranchers raved and threatened. But nothing really happened until Dr. Locke (of Lockeford) brought in a sawmill, gathered the logs marooned in the fields and sawed the logs into lumber. The Lodi lumbermen sought legal redress, but the courts found for the ranchers whose levees the floating logs had breached. No further log damage to levees was reported.

Charles Lever Van Buskirk started logging as a contractor in Wisconsin, December 1866. He ran the field crew and had charge of sales, while his brother George, was in charge of the mill and the manufacturing of lumber.

In 1893, with his Wisconsin timber resources dwindling, Van Buskirk had sent George Bruce, his chief timber cruiser, to California to prospect for new timberland. In Calaveras County, Bruce found what he was looking for and sent for Van Buskirk to view it.

Charles was pleased and after establishing a headquarters in Lodi in June, 1893, purchased the Mokelumne River Manufacturing Company which had timber in Amador and Calaveras counties. With the aid of Mr. Bruce and his brother, George, a dam was built on Blue Creek, part of the drainage area of the Mokelumne River watershed.

One of the reasons the vast Blue Creek area timber resource still lay untouched at the start of the 1890's was its remote location and lack of long distance transportation. Unlike Tuolumne and some other counties along the western slope of the Sierra, the

were numerous.

Mary Hill was always very active in the Lodi Methodist Church. She was one of the soprano soloists for many years, up to the time her husband passed away. She retired from the choir after his death. Many people recalled the years when Mary, Daisy and Nellie belonged to the choir. The three were often heard together in trios, duets or as soloists. Mary's voice was that of a lyric soprano, Daisy was a mezzo-soprano, while Nellie had a sweet soprano voice.

Mrs. Hill was a Sunday school teacher and active in women's church groups for many years.

She took on herself the responsibility of visiting newcomers to Lodi and inviting them to visit the Methodist Church.

When the Woman's Improvement Club was organized in Lodi, Mrs. Hill was associated with this group and maintained membership during her lifetime.

Outside of church activities, Mrs. Hill was most devoted to the Eastern Star Lodge. She went through the various offices and in 1914 became Worthy Matron of the Lodi Chapter with Rollo J. Custer as Worthy Patron. In 1915 she was appointed Grand Warden of the Grand Chapter of the Eastern Star and served in that capacity during 1916.

In addition to her musical talent, Mary was an elocutionist of some skill. She often gave readings and recitations at church, lodge and general social functions. She was fond of flowers and loved to work among them.

Mary Hill passed away on Oct. 12, 1934.

Nellie Etta Hill was born in 1883, eight years after her parents' marriage.

She was a bright child and physically active until she had a severe accident at the age of three. She was sitting in a child's rocking chair on the back porch of the house, and in rocking back and forth, the chair suddenly lurched forward throwing her to the ground. As a result, curvature of the spine set in, and although many methods were used to prevent its pro-

George Washington Hill as a young man. An early settler in Lodi, he became a prominent local merchant.

Calaveras lumber industry did not develop a rail system to move sawlogs to the mill sites. Instead, Calaveras lumbermen used oxen, mules, and later iron-wheeled tractors to haul logs and lumber, thus limiting themselves to relatively small areas in which they could economically operate. But Van Buskirk, calling upon his experience in Wisconsin forests, planned to overcome distance and eliminate hauling costs in the same manner lumbermen did in his native state. He planned to float his cut logs down the Mokelumne River to a mill at Lodi.

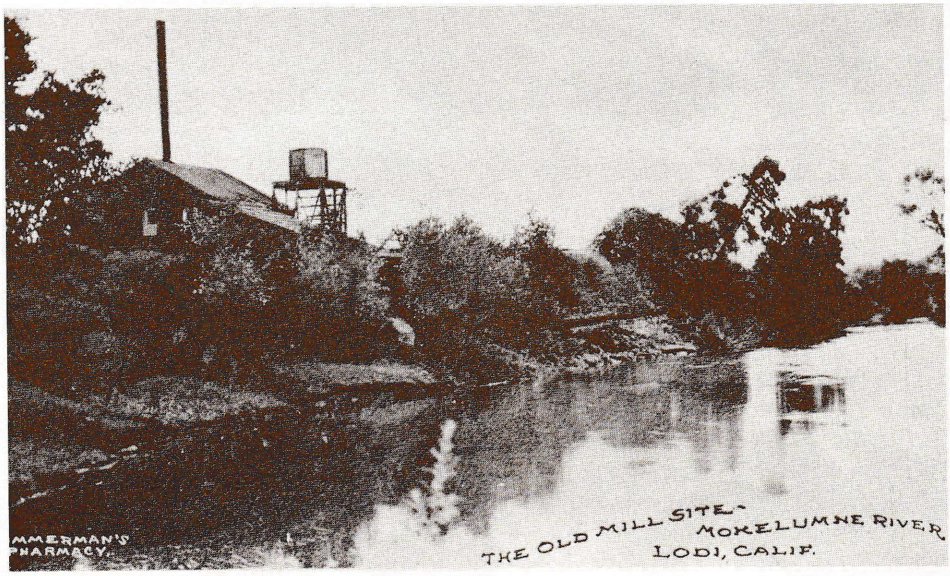
That summer the Mokelumne River canyon echoed with the thunder of dynamite blasts as Van Buskirk's crews blasted out rocks and reefs which might block floating logs. The following year actual logging operations got underway. Prime sugar pine, ponderosa and fir logs were rolled to the creek and slid to the river to await the coming of the high water that would take them downstream. A boom was constructed across the Mokelumne River at Lodi to catch the logs at the site where they were to be milled.

The logging continued until the winter storms brought the river to flood stage. The high water started the logs on the downstream trip.

It was then that Charles made a discovery. Unlike the lightweight white pine logs of Wisconsin, the big ponderosa and sugar pine and white fir logs of the Sierra were largely "sinkers". They refused to float. Those logs that did make it all the way downstream on the flood waters to Lodi broke through the boom and a few days later were creating a navigational hazard in San Francisco Bay. That year, 1895, also recorded major flooding.

After three years, the venture stopped. In 1906, Van Buskirk sold part of his interest to Brown Brothers Lumber Company of Rhinelander, Wisconsin. And in 1919 he sold all his interest to Charles F. Ruggles. In 1939 this became Blagen Lumber Company. American Box, later to become American Forest Products, purchased the Blagen Mill in 1940.

In passing, we see another side of the man who added so much to the town of Lodi in its early days.



Maurice Hill, approximately age 3.

Maurice Hill, 1920.

gress, including laying flat on her back for the most part of several years, the procedures were only partly successful. She attended Salem grammar school off and on and also was a piano pupil of the late Ida A. Gowe, a Lodi piano teacher.

Nellie was always of diminutive size being no taller than a child of 10. She was always proud of her small feet which took a No. 2 shoe.

Her initial accident was not her only one. When nine years old, she fell down the stairs of the barn loft. In this unfortunate accident her nose was broken. In spite of her frail condition, Nellie became a good-looking young lady with large brown eyes and an abundant supply of dark hair which reached below her waist.

Nellie Hill was a very talented person. She not only sang and played the piano well, but was also a composer. One of her songs, "The Soldier's Farewell," is believed to be the first musical composition published by a local person. This song appeared in 1905.

Nellie was something of a poetess, and wrote several poems. She also painted and was an excellent photographer. She developed, printed and tinted her own photos.

She had a happy, sociable disposition and was popular among her many friends. She took part in various entertainments.

On one occasion, when a locally performed extravaganza was put on at the local opera house, she posed in Japanese costume in a beautiful Japanese garden scene which advertised Garden Tea Drips.

Mrs. La Relda Graham Patton of Lodi told of the exquisite child's play house which Mr. Hill made for Nellie during the time she was a shut-in. Daisy Pleas also spoke of how complete this doll house was and that it was furnished throughout.

Nellie joined the Eastern Star Lodge, the Native Daughters and was active in the Epworth League of the Methodist Church, besides being a member of the church choir.

Nellie and her brother, Maurice, appeared at the Knights of Pythias Lodge dressed in Indian costumes which Nellie had made. The garments were covered with elaborate beadwork. They sang "Red Wing."

Nellie Etta Hill passed away on Jan. 30, 1912 while still in her twenties.

Maurice, the second child of George and Mary Hill, was born 17 years after his sister. There were no children in the intervening years. His father must have been nearing 60, and his mother was 43.

He attended Emerson grammar school, graduating in 1916. While attending the fifth grade, Maurice began taking piano lessons from Mrs. Alice McCall. Incidentally, his fifth grade teacher was Miss Jessie McCall, the daughter of his piano teacher.

At first, George Hill objected to his son's piano lessons, but when Maurice's talent became obvious, George consented.

After a time, Maurice studied piano with Mr. Ernest West, who was organist of the Methodist Church.

Feb. 23, 1908 at Maurice Hill's birthday party. From left to right, top row: Bernice LeMoin, Theresa Bauer, Susie Black. Middle: Charlie Black, Wanda McMurtry, George McMurtry, Wilma Clark and Maurice. Bottom: Annie Bauer, LeMoin Beckman and Margaret Beckman.

After Maurice's first year at Lodi High his way of life was completely changed. Mr. Seaten, president of the College of the Pacific at San Jose, was in Lodi and heard of the budding pianist. Mr. Seaten explained to the Hills the advantages in a course of study at the College of the Pacific Conservatory of Music, and prevailed on them to allow Maurice to register for the next term. Thus, he left Lodi in 1917 and took paino from Warren D. Allen, and eight Conservatory subjects from Howard H. Hanson. Mr. Hanson was later dean of the conservatory and became a nationally known composer and conductor. He also served as dean of the Conservatory of Music at Rochester, New York.

Maurice also studied music history under Charles M. Dennis. At the same time, he was entered in the Academy which was comparable to high school and here Maurice completed the next two years of high school work.

One course was music compostion under Howard Hanson. Maurice had begun composing at an early age, in fact, as soon as he learned to read music. He had completed a little opera, "Geraldine", named after the famous opera singer, Geraldine Harrar, by the age of 17.

During his study at San Jose, Maurice's compositions were featured on some of the Conservatory programs. He also took part as pianist and composer in various concerts and sometimes in two piano numbers with two other young men and Mr. Hanson.

In 1919 Maurice played the part of a poet, one of the two male leads in a college musical titled, "The Romance Rose." It was written by Don Richards of San Jose.

After two years at the Conservatory, Maurice returned to Lodi for a year and re-entered Lodi High School, graduating with his class in 1920.

The following year, he returned to San Jose for his third Conservatory year and his first of college.

In the fall of 1921, near the beginning of his fourth year, he was forced to leave college due to an extended illness. When Maurice recovered sufficiently, he went to Oakland where he spent the next six years, studying three years with the widely known composer and theorist, William J. McCoy. Maurice was Mr. McCoy's last pupil prior to his death from pneumonia in 1926.

During Maurice's stay in Oakland, he appeared in a series of piano recitals over radio station KTAB, and also played over KPO in San Francisco. He was also engaged in teaching piano.

In 1929, Maurice returned to Lodi and soon after spent three months in Hawaii along with his mother and Aunt Daisy. Inspired by the tropical beauty of the islands, Maurice wrote his first book of poems, "The Golden Shower" which was published by the Honolulu Star-Bulletin.

From this time on, Maurice wrote many poems which were printed in poetry journals and newspapers. He won a number of prizes for some of these poems, but did not write professionally until 1934.

Shortly after his mother passed away, Maurice's poem "Should You Remember" appeared in Love Story Magazine of New York City. This was the first poem for which he received payment. After this he wrote professionally until 1960. His poems appeared in various magazines, religious papers and journals, and various newspapers. To the Christian Science Monitor alone, he sold over 80 poems for the Forum page. He also wrote for the juvenile market, selling poems and songs to "Child Life", "Jack & Jill', "The Grade Teacher" and others.

During these years, Maurice was awarded honorary membership in two noted societies, the Eugene Field Society and the Mark Twain Society. Both of these organizations had their headquarters in the homes of the

These photos attest to Nellie Hill's skills as a costumer. At left Nellie and Maurice pose in Indian dress. Above Nellie Hill in the Japanese costume she wore in a local performance at the Lodi Opera House.

respective writers. Honorary membership was awarded poets and authors who distinguished themselves in their chosen fields. In 1937, Maurice published his second volume of poems, "Follow the Compass."

During his mother's lifetime, Maurice traveled extensively, first to Alaska in 1927, and in 1930 to Europe, accompanied by Aunt Daisy. In the fall of 1931 the three traveled to Hawaii where Maurice taught piano and appeared in concert. After six months his aunt returned to Lodi, but Maurice and his mother remained in the islands, returning in 1933.

After his mother's death, Daisy and Maurice made two trips to Alaska, one in 1935 and one in 1938.

In 1938 Maurice enrolled in a course of art at the College of the Pacific in Stockton. He followed this course of study for three years, and produced several hundred paintings and drawings. He also took a year's piano teaching course.

Maurice's painting have been exhibited at the Grape Festival art show, among others.

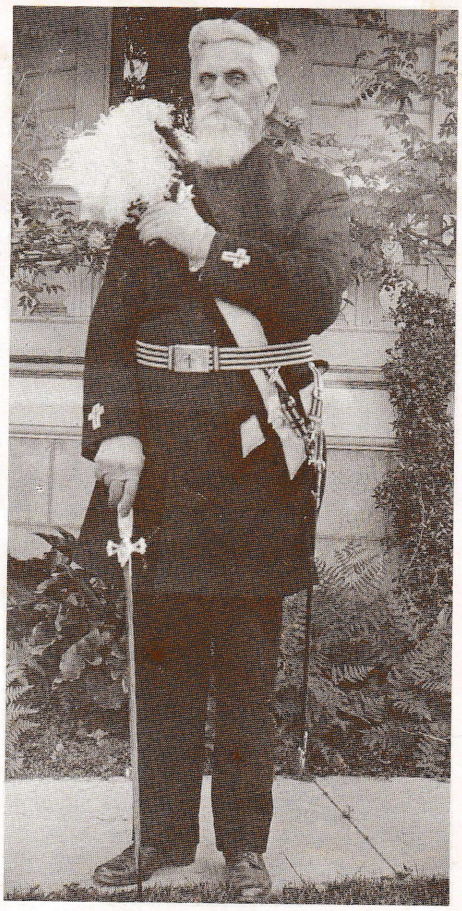
Maurice also appeared several times as pianist-composer on the Helen Viola Bush radio show, which was popular many years ago. He also spoke on poetry technique on the same program.

In 1948, the business district of Lodi was expanding to such a degree that Maurice sold his property to the Woolworth Co. Dave Fitzsimmons moved the house in two sections to its present location on south Church Street. In 1950 Maurice sold the Hill jewelry store to Charles Kroll, who operated the store under his name for a number of years.

Also in 1950, Maurice became interested in the history of Lodi. He began to do extensive research work. His information came from many sources but mainly through the study of old newspapers at the Sacramento State library, and the Stockton and Lodi libraries. He also interviewed oldtimers and perused county histories.

In 1973, he began writing the chapters for a book on Lodi history. The work was fascinating, but Maurice was handicapped by the onset of glaucoma. Maurice Hill passed away in March of 1984, before completing his history of Lodi. He willed his house and contents as a museum in memory of his family.

The Lodi Historical Society is in the process of publishing his writings and making the house available to the present and future generations of Lodi.



G.W. Hill poses in 1910 wearing his Knight Templar uniform.
Photo taken by Nellie Hill

Lodi Chapter of Eastern Star Lodge, 1914. Left to right, standing: Mrs. Leslie Hause (later Grand Matron of California), Henrietta Hines, Esther Bowen, Mrs. John (Mattie Harney) Stein, Mrs. Hale, Mrs. G.W. Hill (center) Worthy Matron, Mrs. Frank (Addine LeMoin) Beckman, Mrs. Emma Brown, Mrs. Rollo J. Custer, Mrs. Shattuck. Seated: Mrs. Grace Nelson, Mrs. John (Elizabeth Bowling) Montgomery, Mrs. Cook, Mr. Rollo J. Custer, Mrs. John Willms and Mrs. Blakely.

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